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STYLE

## Meet the GOP operatives who aim to smear the 2020 Democrats — but keep bungling it

By Manuel Roig-Franzia and Beth Reinhard  
June 4, 2019



Jacob Wohl, left, and Jack Burkman in Burkman's Arlington, Va., home in May. (Dayna Smith for The Washington Post)

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**Correction:** This story has been updated to correct a statement that Jacob A. Wohl's firm paid a \$5,000 fine and \$32,000 in restitution after agreeing to a cease-and-desist order following an Arizona regulatory commission conclusion that he had committed securities fraud. According to the Arizona Attorney General's Office, the fine and restitution have not been paid.

Jack Burkman and Jacob Wohl — a pair of boundlessly eager, profoundly unrepentant aspirants to the dankest depths of political chicanery — were watching television together the other day when something caught Burkman's eye.

There on the screen was Don McGahn, President Trump's former White House counsel.

It was at that very moment when Burkman remembered that McGahn had connected the unlikely duo — Burkman, the 53-year-old Washington lobbyist, and Wohl, a 21-year-old Californian trailed by investment scandals.



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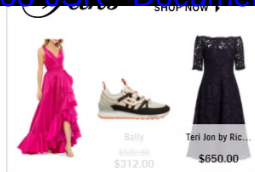
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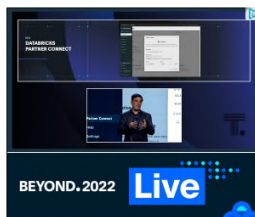


Yes, it was McGahn, they agreed, who had put them together a year ago by sharing Wohl's cellphone number with Burkman. That was before their spree of bungled smears — including a disappearing sexual assault accuser against special counsel Robert Mueller (announced at a news conference that Burkman conducted with his [pants zipper down](#)) and a botched attempt last month to paint Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg as a sexual predator.

Alas, Burkman's juicy origin story about the formation of their partnership didn't check out. That tends to happen a lot in their world.

McGahn said through his attorney that he doesn't know Wohl or Burkman.

As it turns out, the truth or falsity of a Burkman-Wohl-concocted story is merely an inconvenience. Let the media's "puritanical" fact-checkers puzzle it out: That's the view of this twosome who fancy themselves as sub rosa players in the 2020 presidential contest and busy themselves trafficking in Internet rumors they hope will damage Democratic candidates.



Like notorious dirty tricksters before them, they operate in a realm where it matters little whether their claims are proved — they hardly ever are — but only whether they somehow slip into a corpuscle or two of the national bloodstream. But today it's a more dangerous game: They operate in an era when notions about truth and fiction have been upended and in which many Americans get their information from self-affirming, partisan silos, making their brand of political cyberwarfare hyper-relevant.

Though he wasn't involved, Wohl speaks admiringly of the fringe effort to undermine Sen. Ted Cruz's 2016 presidential campaign with loopy claims that the Texas Republican's father was involved in President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

"That was good stuff," Wohl says. "That was brilliant."

*[Donald Trump associates Ted Cruz's father with JFK's assassin]*

McGahn's reaction to Wohl and Burkman claiming an association with him was similar to that of former House speaker Paul Ryan, whom Burkman had described over a recent lunch as his "best friend in Congress." Ryan's spokesman said simply, "That is not true."



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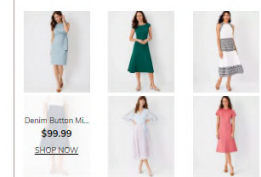
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House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland, whom Burkman had called his “only Democratic friend” in Congress, said through a spokeswoman that he doesn’t know Burkman, either.

Burkman had also claimed to keep in touch with Kellyanne Conway, one of Trump’s most visible White House counselors. Via text, Conway said: “I’ve not seen or talked to him in years. Maybe 10-15-20 years??? We were in TV green rooms during Clinton impeachment. Be careful with that one!”

And then there is Donald Trump Jr., the president’s son. Wohl claimed to be in contact with him.

“Don wouldn’t be able to pick this guy out of a lineup if his life depended on it,” Trump Jr.’s spokesman said.

Burkman’s role in the tag team is a bit convoluted — while claiming he seeks to hurt Trump’s Democratic opponents, he has also hinted that he might mount a primary challenge against Trump over his dissatisfaction with the president’s progress on building a border wall. During the 2016 campaign, Burkman took out a full-page ad in the Los Angeles Daily News condemning Trump, then later scheduled a fundraiser for the likely GOP nominee, [even though campaign staffers said they didn’t know him](#).



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Burkman eventually canceled the event after receiving a stern letter of disapproval from none other than McGahn.

Wohl, on the other hand, has appointed himself as an unaffiliated booster of Trump’s reelection effort. He talks of “amplifying” a speck of information here and there that would be helpful to the president’s campaign.

“That detail could be true,” he says. “Or false.”



Wohl, 21, was co-orchestrator with Burkman, 53, of a failed effort to smear presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg. (Dayna Smith for The Washington Post)



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## '2020 Election Central'

In his short, busy life so far, Wohl has been declared a teenage hedge-fund wunderkind, “the Wohl of Wall Street,” in media reports, and been barred from membership in a national futures trading association that looked disapprovingly at his alleged refusal to be interviewed about fraud allegations. One of his firms has been investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission in a case in which the agency decided not to bring charges, while adding that the decision “should not be considered an exoneration,” according to an SEC document.



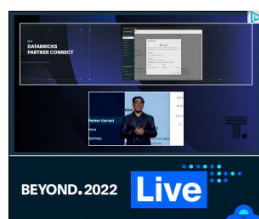
Wohl's firm also agreed to a cease-and-desist order and a \$5,000 fine and \$32,000 in restitution after an [Arizona regulatory commission concluded he had committed securities fraud via two hedge funds and a house-flipping venture](#). The fine remains unpaid, according to the Arizona Attorney General's office.

Wohl says he's never faced a criminal charge or a lawsuit. “I think those are good indications that I've never done anything wrong with respect to any of my business ventures,” he says.

Wohl also has boasted of launching several businesses, though their provenances are vague and their client lists even vaguer, and he has been banned from Twitter for allegedly creating fake accounts. (Before he was banned, Wohl says, his most cherished follower was Ivanka Trump — an assertion that actually appears to be true.)

*[Twitter suspends far-right activist Jacob Wohl for creating accounts to allegedly manipulate the U.S. presidential election]*

On Instagram, Wohl is prone to posting images of himself shirtless, staring into the camera with a come-hither look. He says he wants “what any other young man wants — fame and fortune.”



In his public appearances, he favors tightfitting suits and cultivates a serious demeanor. He swears by Garnier Fructis styling gel to shape his dark brown hair into a follicular architectural form with a gravity-defying ledge in the front.

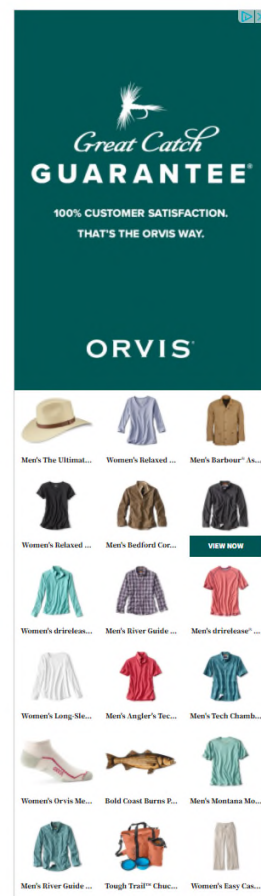
On his wrist, he wears a pricey Richard Mille watch that he says he bought for a cut-rate price from an NBA player (whom he won't name) in dire financial straits.

“I flip watches,” Wohl says. “I *never* lose money on watches.”

Wohl — whose father, David Wohl, was a Trump 2016 campaign

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Wohl — whose father, David Wohl, was a Trump 2016 campaign surrogate — says he lives in Irvine, Calif., but he has become a regular presence and active selfie-taker in the lobby of the Trump hotel in Washington.

He is also a frequent guest at Burkman’s spacious Arlington townhouse, which they call “2020 Election Central” and say they plan to use as headquarters for a campaign to vet Democratic presidential candidates. The home is decorated with glass chandeliers, busts of Roman emperors and a lavender-accented four-poster canopy bed with sequined throw pillows. The aesthetic is a mishmash of ideas from the succession of women who Burkman says have come in and out of his life, staying for ill-defined lengths of time: “As long as anyone could like me.”



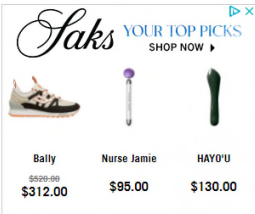
The only room Burkman decorated himself is a nook with forest-scene wallpaper, a couch, stuffed animals and children’s books. That’s the domain of his irascible dachshund and almost constant companion, Jack Jr.

Burkman says he is engaged to Margaret Howell, who has been an on-air reporter for the Kremlin-backed RT television network, the conspiracy site Infowars and Right Side Broadcasting, a Trump-loving live-streaming outfit.

Burkman, who has faced at least one attempt on his life, is ever-shadowed by a security man named Luis armed with a Glock pistol. “Margaret is afraid somebody is going to come with a machine gun and take us out,” he says.

Howell did not respond to an interview request.

On his podcast, “[Behind the Curtain With Jack Burkman](#),” Burkman opined not long ago about the “terrible rise of feminism” as one of the great dangers facing America.



“If you ask a young girl in a big city like Washington or New York or Boston what’s on her mind, she doesn’t say, ‘Sexual harassment.’ She doesn’t say, ‘Workplace opportunity.’ You know what she says? ‘I can’t find me a man. Find me a rich man.’”

Burkman has been equally explicit about the rules of engagement at his home.

“I’ve made clear to Margaret,” he says, “that she must produce a boy.”





Burkman in his home, where he lives with a dachshund named Jack Jr. (Dayna Smith for The Washington Post)

## 'American Decency'

Burkman grew up in Swissvale, Pa., a small town outside Pittsburgh. He says his father was active in local Democratic politics and his mother, whose family hailed from Sicily, was an arch conservative.

“She had a picture of Mussolini in the house,” Burkman says.

His brother, Jim Burkman, says that’s not so.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Jack Burkman, who had graduated from Georgetown Law, looked a lot like an establishment Republican. He was a Capitol Hill staffer for GOP congressman Rick Lazio of New York. He worked at Holland & Knight, a major law firm, lobbying on behalf of big corporate clients. He also worked briefly as a Fox News contributor and appeared as a pundit on CNN and MSNBC, leveraging a TV-ready look with a square jaw and a baritone voice.

Once he formed his own firm, he built what became a thriving lobbying practice. In 2013, he signed more clients than any registered lobbyist, [according to tracking by the media outlet the Hill](#). His firm’s revenue peaked that year at \$3.52 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

“It’s always a curiosity to me — how does he get so many clients?” says his friend and law school classmate Raga Elim, who is now a lobbyist.

Burkman was still far from a household name in 2014 when he hit on a topic that put him in the headlines and on news programs across the country. He proposed banning gay players in the National Football League around the time an openly gay football player, Michael Sam, was coming to prominence.

Burkman formed an organization called American Decency and claimed to have signed up more than 3 million members. (Looking back, Burkman says that “it could be the case” that his claim about having that many members “wasn’t true.”)

The next few weeks would play out like a preview of the next few years of Burkman’s life.

Confusion ensued. A conservative group with an almost identical name issued a news release insisting it was not involved, but it took the opportunity to say it did “not condone the lifestyle of Michael Sam.”

Burkman’s brother Jim, who is gay, took to Twitter to say Burkman was “being an ass.”

The proposal went nowhere.

For Jim, it was telling to watch his brother reveling in the attention.

“That,” Jim says, “was when I realized he loved it.”



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Burkman's firm has gotten less business as he has shifted his focus to being a media personality, including hosting a show for a time on the conservative network Newsmax. In 2018, it logged \$884,000 in fees, its smallest total in seven years, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. (Now, he says, he makes most of his income as a silent partner



smallest total in seven years, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. (Now, he says, he makes most of his income as a silent partner in West Coast gyms that he refuses to identify.)

Denver Darling, president of California-based Darco Construction — which has paid Burkman's firm \$218,000 since 2018 for “a variety of bills and issues” that he declined to detail — said he’s “really not interested in any of that stuff” Burkman does in politics.

Burkman has worked with companies seeking government contracts, but usually, he says, it’s more along the lines of “some rich guy in Idaho wants to come in [to a congressional office] and talk about the ‘deep state.’ ”



Burkman and Wohl held a news conference in May trying to pin sexual assault allegations on Buttigieg, but their claims were shot down by their only witness before they ever got to the microphone. (Dayna Smith for The Washington Post)

## 'Whomever they have to hurt'

The spectacle that is the Burkman-Wohl partnership launched late last year. The duo hyped a news conference promising to introduce a woman who allegedly claimed to have been raped by Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. [The woman was a no-show.](#)

[Mueller asked the FBI to investigate](#) allegations that women were offered money to make sexual assault claims against him. Burkman and Wohl no longer want to say much about their Mueller probe but have denied offering money for testimony.

[\[Mueller asks FBI to investigate claims women were offered money to say he behaved inappropriately\]](#)

A few months later, on April 29, a shocking post went up on Medium, the self-publishing website. It was purportedly written by a 21-year-old gay college student named Hunter Kelly who claimed Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg had sexually assaulted him.

Just hours later, the story started to unravel.

“I WAS NOT SEXUALLY ASSAULTED,” Kelly posted on Facebook.

In an interview with The Washington Post, Kelly said he met Wohl via Instagram and got a message from him asking, “Do you want to be part of a political operation?”

Wohl’s pitch, according to Kelly, was to work on a Trump-backed project scrutinizing Buttigieg’s record on race relations. Burkman booked a plane ticket for Kelly, a student at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich.

After they got to Burkman’s home, Kelly said, under pressure from Wohl and Burkman he reluctantly signed a statement alleging that Buttigieg had assaulted him in a room at the Washington’s Mayflower Hotel in February. Kelly claimed that he had not seen the Medium post before it went online and had not approved its publication. The whole story, he

February. Kelly claimed that he had not seen the Medium post before it went online and had not approved its publication. The whole story, he said, was entirely made up.

“Those two are willing to do whatever it takes and to hurt whomever they have to hurt so they can keep the spotlight on them and get what they want,” Kelly told The Post.

Kelly said he grew uncomfortable and called a relative to pick him up so he could slip out of Burkman’s house. Burkman and Wohl have mocked that suggestion, saying they took Kelly to get his hair cut at an expensive salon and bought him a caramel Frappuccino at Starbucks.

Wohl and Burkman went ahead with a news conference even after Kelly recanted. Later Burkman expressed great delight that video of the event being interrupted by a loud garbage truck was widely shared on the Internet.

Burkman and Wohl dispute Kelly’s claim that they told him they were working at the behest of the administration or the Trump campaign, and they say he recanted only under pressure from family members. A Trump campaign spokeswoman said, “This had nothing to do with the campaign.”

But last month, Burkman tweeted: “Yes, President Trump is well aware of our efforts to investigate the 2020 field of Dem Presidential candidates.”

A document published by the Daily Beast has laid out a plan of Wohl’s to raise \$1 million for a business that would disseminate false information about Democratic presidential candidates to swing political betting markets. Wohl told the Daily Beast he had nothing to do with the document outlining the business plan for the “Arlington Center for Political Intelligence.”

But, in an interview with The Post, Wohl acknowledged that the document was in fact a draft of his plan and that he had purposely misled the online publication because he believed it would not write about the document if he told it the truth.

In this fact-challenged epoch, Wohl and Burkman feel they accomplished their goal of damaging Buttigieg, pointing to a dip in his valuation in European betting markets.

Wohl says he tipped some “miscellaneous rich people in Newport Beach” — whom he refused to name — and they “profited handsomely” by shorting Buttigieg in advance of their allegations against the South Bend, Ind., mayor. Asked whether that was akin to insider-trading scams in equities markets, Wohl says, “If this were stocks, you couldn’t do that.”

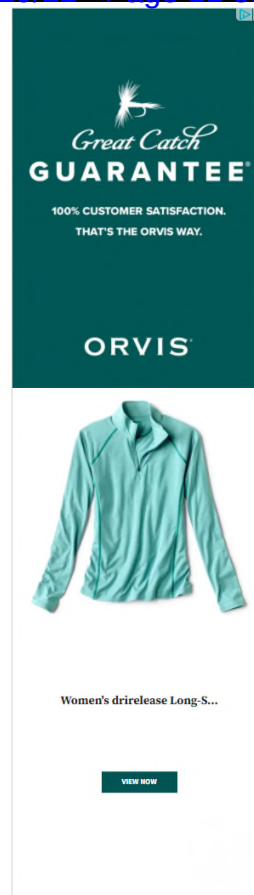
Experts on political betting are skeptical, and they also note that it is illegal for Americans to trade on European prediction markets.

“There is just no indication that anything they were doing influenced the price,” said David Rothschild, an economist who specializes in prediction markets.

Burkman’s prediction about his own future seems the unlikeliest of all. He claims he could self-fund a presidential campaign until Super Tuesday.

Pressed about the long odds of his mounting a viable campaign, given his entanglements in scandal and his total lack of party support, Burkman thinks about it for a moment. Then he says, “You start with the fundamental truth that they think I’m nuts.”

Yet, he says, he recently traveled to Iowa and attempted to meet with some Republican muckety-mucks.



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"I reached out," he says. "Nobody returned my call."

Carol D. Leonnig, Alice Crites and Andrew Ba Tran contributed to this report.

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By Manuel Roig-Franzia

Manuel Roig-Franzia is a feature writer in The Washington Post's Style section, where he profiles national figures in the worlds of politics, the law and the arts. He previously served as bureau chief in Miami for The Post's National staff and in Mexico City for the Post's Foreign staff. He is the author of a biography of Sen. Marco Rubio. [Twitter](#)



By Beth Reinhard

Beth Reinhard has been a reporter on the investigations desk since 2017. She previously worked at the Wall Street Journal, National Journal, the Miami Herald and the Palm Beach Post. [Twitter](#)

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